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National Intelligence Estimate

# Soviet Global Military Reach

## Key Judgments

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*NIE 11-6-84  
13 September 1984*

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## SOVIET GLOBAL MILITARY REACH

### KEY JUDGMENTS

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THE NATIONAL FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE BOARD CONCURS, EXCEPT AS NOTED IN THE TEXT.

*The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of the Estimate:*

The Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State and the Treasury.

*Also Participating:*

The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army

The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy

The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force

The Director of Intelligence, Headquarters, Marine Corps

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## SCOPE NOTE

Soviet capabilities to project military power in the areas around the immediate periphery of the USSR are far superior to Soviet military capabilities in more distant areas. Formidable Soviet forces have long existed for operations in areas of Europe, the Far East, and Southwest Asia that are contiguous to the USSR. Beyond this zone, Soviet military activities have traditionally been limited principally to military assistance and support for foreign forces. Over the last 20 years, however, Soviet foreign military involvement abroad has increased significantly. Soviet forces have made greater use of support facilities overseas, Soviet naval and air presence at longer ranges from the USSR has been more frequent, and on a few occasions Soviet forces have become directly involved in combat overseas. This Estimate is concerned with Soviet military capabilities in those more distant areas over the next five to 10 years.

This Estimate distinguishes between what we term "global military reach" and the more common notion of military "power projection." The essential distinction between military reach and power projection in this Estimate is the nature and scope of military operations envisioned under each concept. Military reach is associated with smaller scale operations, often in the context of supporting an ally in a regional crisis. Power projection envisions the deployment of major combined-arms formations, usually against substantial opposition. Whereas the projection of US military power, especially to Europe, is vital to US security, Soviet defense does not require the deployment of substantial military forces abroad. Indeed, for the United States all major wars in the last century have been fought beyond American shores. Soviet wartime experience has been just the opposite. Therefore, it is not surprising that the two armed forces have been developed with differing requirements. By our definition, the forces and operational concepts usually associated with power projection include pre-positioned equipment, rapid deployment and amphibious forces, foreign staging and logistic bases, aircraft carriers, and aerial refueling capabilities. These characteristics have generally been lacking in Soviet forces. Instead we note growing Soviet military involvement abroad of a different nature, not closely associated with the NATO contingency. This involvement—which we call global reach—includes provision of arms, dispatch of military advisers, acquisition of air and sea access abroad, and small-scale deployment of Soviet forces.

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The military significance of Soviet access to foreign facilities is the key issue addressed in this Estimate. More generally, this Estimate:

- Examines Soviet military involvement in areas beyond the range of tactical aircraft based in the USSR.
- Describes trends in Soviet access to foreign facilities over the past two decades.
- Examines new Soviet military developments that affect capabilities for distant military operations.
- Identifies the roles of client governments in Soviet foreign military involvement.
- In conclusion, discusses the type of military threats that Soviet forces operating from foreign facilities are likely to pose for US and friendly forces during the next five to 10 years.

A companion Estimate, NIE 11-10/2-84, *The USSR and the Third World*, provides the broad political context of Soviet involvement abroad. The reader may also wish to consult the *National HUMINT Collection Plan: No. 58, Soviet Power Projection Capabilities*.

## KEY JUDGMENTS

The steady increase in size, capability, range of operations, and scope of activity of Soviet forces abroad over the last 20 years provides a global military reach that Moscow did not previously possess. The military significance of Soviet forces beyond the periphery of the USSR already has been demonstrated in a variety of ways. In peacetime and during regional crises Soviet forces abroad have:

- Intervened in Middle East conflicts in defense of allies.
- Supported the intervention of Cuban forces in Africa.
- Directed foreign forces in combat operations.
- Collected intelligence and conducted reconnaissance and surveillance missions.
- Provided support to Soviet allies, including arms, advice, training, and demonstrations of force.
- Protected the Soviet fishing fleet and other interests abroad.
- Resupplied or provided new military equipment rapidly to Soviet allies involved in hostilities.
- Evacuated Soviet personnel.
- Established a military presence in new areas and, at times, increased an already existing military presence, thus complicating the military planning of adversaries.

In all of these regional activities, however, the Soviets have been careful not to challenge directly either the United States or other strong regional powers. This is because, beyond the range of its land-based airpower, Moscow would have difficulty in rapidly mounting or sustaining a distant power projection effort in the face of limited Third World opposition. Soviet forces deployed abroad are thinly spread, are vulnerable, and lack offensive punch. In particular, they lack adequate air defenses, antisubmarine warfare capabilities, at-sea logistics, staging rights, aerial refueling capabilities, and tactical air support.

Despite these weaknesses, Soviet forces abroad are becoming more significant factors in a possible military confrontation with the United States, particularly just prior to hostilities and during the early stages of a conflict. For example, they could:

- Attack Western naval targets at the onset of hostilities.

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- Provide targeting information and intelligence.
- Delay some reinforcements.
- Divert some US military resources.
- Disrupt some shipping and air routes.

For the next five to 10 years, Soviet military deployments abroad will not overextend the USSR, but may stretch the United States. In particular, US military planners will be faced with the problem of how best to deal with hostile forces operating well beyond the Soviet periphery. As detailed below, this problem will be compounded by three persisting developments: first, *Soviet capabilities* for distant military operations will improve, although Soviet forces are not likely to be deployed in substantially larger numbers; second, *Soviet use of current foreign facilities* is likely to be more extensive even though there probably will not be a significant expansion in Soviet military access abroad and perhaps it will even decline; third, *Soviet regional allies* that act in support of Moscow's interests abroad will become increasingly capable as they are provided with modern Soviet arms.

#### Soviet Capabilities

Several new developments over the next five to 10 years will improve Soviet capabilities for distant military operations, including:

- Introduction of aerial refueling for fighter and transport aircraft.
- Improvements in airlift and sealift capabilities.
- Establishment of a global command and control system incorporating a new airborne warning and control system aircraft, along with space-based communications, intelligence, and navigation systems.
- Deployment of more capable submarines and surface combatants, especially the large, nuclear-powered carrier for conventional-takeoff-and-landing aircraft.

Even with these improvements, however, Soviet forces abroad will continue to have serious limitations. They probably will remain modest in numbers, including only about 15 percent of the Soviet Navy. Transit delays and other factors could limit the rapid augmentation of naval formations. In addition, many of the foreign facilities used by Soviet forces will lack adequate repair, refueling, and storage capabilities. Also, Soviet airlifts to distant areas will encounter problems in overflight clearances, landing rights, and refueling.

Over the next decade, Soviet military forces still will not be able to carry out substantial combined-arms operations against major military

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opposition in areas distant from the USSR. Soviet intervention in Third World conflicts probably will be restricted to situations where the risk of escalation to a war with the West is judged to be small and Soviet capabilities to perform higher priority strategic missions would not be seriously degraded. In general, Soviet military intervention would most likely involve naval maneuvers, or the dispatch of pilots, air defense units, or small contingents of ground forces to bolster local defenses. Such intervention is most likely in the Middle East, where the stakes are high and the region close to the USSR.

We do not believe that Soviet forces abroad currently play a major role in Soviet military doctrine for general war, which remains focused on the traditional mission of strategic defense of the homeland. Soviet forces routinely deployed abroad are now, and will remain for the period of this Estimate, too few and too weak to allow the Soviets to engage in distant power projection.

#### **Soviet Use of Foreign Facilities**

Soviet capabilities for distant military operations have generally improved with increased access to foreign facilities, although the Soviet Navy continues to rely primarily on its own auxiliaries for logistic support. The USSR now has a military presence in most major regions of the world. Soviet naval forces now maintain a continuous presence in the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the South Atlantic off the coast of West Africa, and the South China Sea. Access in Vietnam has grown to the point where the Soviets have established a naval and air operations and logistics base at Cam Ranh Bay. (See figure 1.)

Even though much of the past Soviet success in gaining access has been due to circumstances that are not likely to be repeated, instabilities in the Third World are likely to provide a few additional opportunities for Soviet exploitation, and Moscow will continue widespread probing for additional access. The Middle East region will remain the top-priority target. In addition to those countries where the USSR already enjoys routine military access, others may permit more extensive Soviet access, most notably Seychelles or some countries in West Africa. On the other hand, Moscow could also lose military access, as for example in Angola, Guinea, or Ethiopia.

Regardless of these gains or losses, increasing use of foreign facilities to which the Soviets already have access can be expected, particularly in Vietnam. A South China Sea naval squadron has probably been established. The number of submarines, surface combatants, and naval aircraft deployed to Cam Ranh Bay will continue to grow. Soviet fighter aircraft also are likely to be deployed to Cam Ranh Bay. In the Caribbean, Soviet aircraft and ships probably will make

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more frequent deployments, but we do not anticipate the introduction of any new Soviet-manned offensive weapons in Cuba.<sup>1</sup>

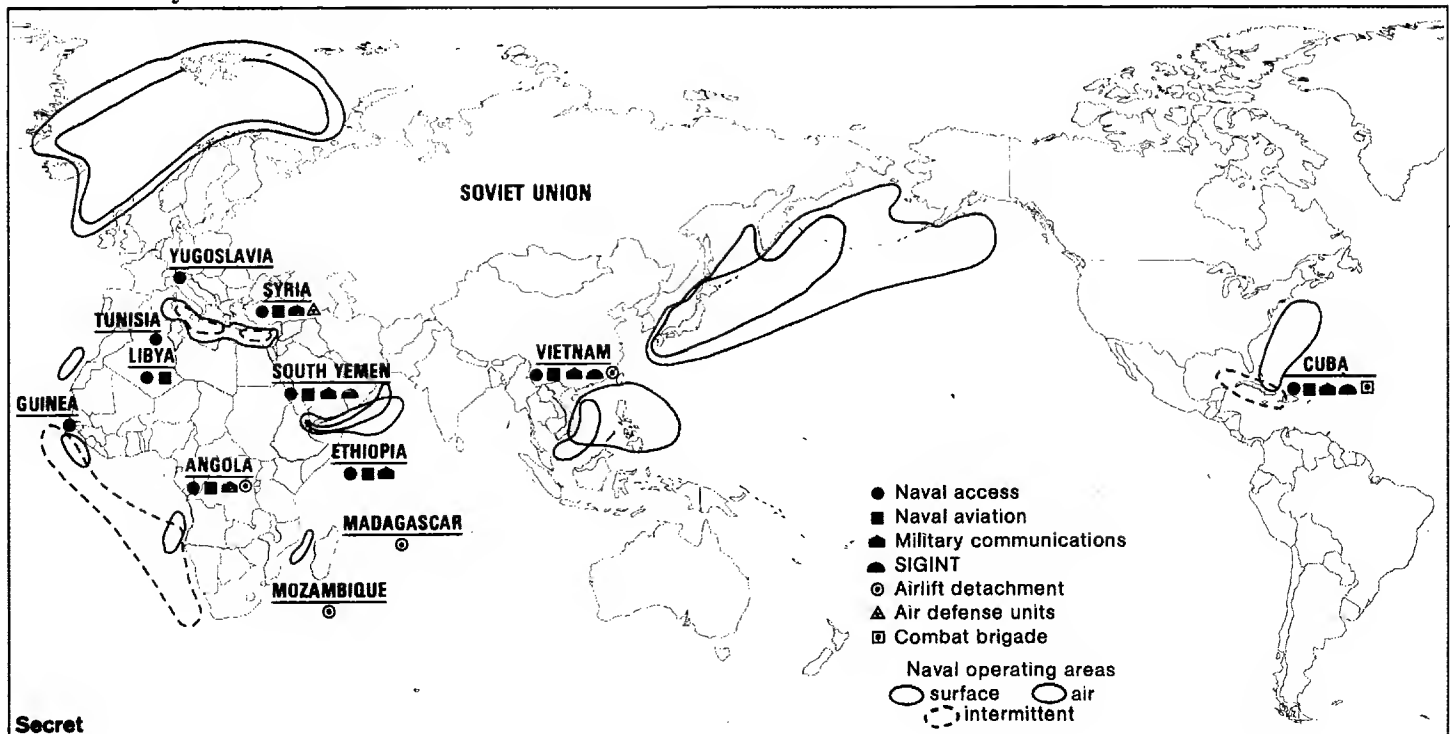
#### Soviet Allies

Soviet arms transfers will continue to improve substantially the military capabilities of several Soviet allies. Moscow will export modern weapons to selected Third World allies, in some cases before they are made available to non-Soviet Warsaw Pact forces. In addition, joint military exercises could improve the potential for coordinating combined military operations.

Certain Soviet allies, most notably Cuba, will be willing to act in support of Soviet interests short of direct confrontation with the United States. By funneling military supplies and providing troops and advisers, Cuba can mask the full extent of Soviet involvement abroad.

<sup>1</sup> The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, believes that, although it is currently unlikely that the Soviets would place SS-20s in Cuba in the near future, the possibility still exists and, because of the great danger it poses, warrants continuing consideration.

**Figure 1**  
**Soviet Military Presence Abroad**



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